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Reading this work one is constantly reminded of that famous proverbial quote variously attributed to Alexander the Great, George Washington or Napoleon:

> ‘An army of sheep led by a lion is better than an army of lions led by a sheep.’

Military commentators of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, like Bernardino de Mendoza, François de la Noue and Sir Roger Williams, have considered the person of the commander to be an element of paramount, if not decisive importance for the effective deployment and performance of an army and for the successful outcome of tactical and strategic activity. In contemporary historiography, which tends to treat the value of an individual’s influence in and over historical events with scepticism, Fernando González de León’s study of the evolution of command structures of the Spanish Army of Flanders puts the individual commander back to his rightful, leading place.

The author begins his analysis in the 1560s-1580s, the years when the Spanish Army of Flanders was commanded by the Great Duke of Alba and officers springing from what the author terms ‘the school of Alba’. In those decades, the Duke’s organisational and administrative vision, as well as his meritocratic approach to promotions in general and high command appointments in particular, was of central importance for maintaining discipline, operational precision and the combat effectiveness which made the Army of Flanders the supreme military force of the day. The author concludes his narration in an era when the Spanish high command had transformed from a military élite into a ‘demoralised and increasingly incompetent group’ which led the Army of Flanders to disaster and defeat.

González de León ably illustrates the gradual perceptual transformation of the commander’s and officer’s role, taking into account what he terms ‘the social and intellectual dimensions of this process of military deterioration’. He observes the attitudes of administrative institutions, of the nobility, the usual retainers of positions of authority, and of the supreme commanders themselves, often critical of the deterioration in standards of the officer corps but nonetheless unable to prevent it. He also introduces interesting aspects relating to the peculiarities of this largely unique army, what we can term its managed national hierarchy, and the problems created through attempts to preserve traditions of balance between Spaniards and the naciones which formed it.

The final part, before the author’s concluding remarks, is occupied by an analysis of the 1643 battle of Rocroi, an analysis much more careful, detailed and vivid than the only other dedicated treatment of this event in contemporary historiography.1 The heavy Spanish defeat at Rocroi did not signify the destruction of Spanish military capability. Indeed, the Spanish continued to fight on for decades, fielding, equipping and transporting thousands of men around numerous sectors of operations. It would also be problematic to attribute the loss of the battle to incompetence of command. Such simplifications are of little help in unravelling any meaningful significance of this major blow to the Spanish army’s aura of invincibility. However, Rocroi does prove an excellent choice by the historian to illustrate the regressive path in style of command and standards of leadership, a path symptomatic of decline in army organisation, which in its turn led ultimately to defeat and withdrawal. Brave, sometimes excessively so, generally competent in strategy, in selecting goals and objectives, the Spanish cabos became less and less able to respond to tactical, organisational and strategic challenges before them, because of a gradually systematic and systemic inexperience and a perception of warfare as pageantry, as a sequence of grand gestures far removed from the austere and pragmatic approach of the Alba school.

Minor points of critique can be put forward. How far can the mutinies in the Army of Flanders in the early period of the Dutch revolt be reconciled with the supposed organisational and administrative merits of the Alba school? Another interesting point requiring further analysis is the level of the

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Alba system’s imperviousness to pressures from the court, to faction rivalries, to local pressures and to the government’s will to give in to these by promoting members of the local élites, a tactic which became regular following Alba’s recall to Spain. It would also be fair to explore other possible factors which influenced the Army of Flanders’ effectiveness, for instance traditional bonds of camaraderie among the tercios’ rank and file, which would place the significance of able command within a proper context.

Despite these minor objections, however, *The Road to Rocroi* remains an exceptional and interesting piece of scholarly research and a long missing and thus especially welcome addition to the very few dedicated works on the army of the Spanish Hapsburgs in English.